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<Book Reviews>Anders Poulsen. Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand: Forty Years of Development and Cultural Change

AUTHOR(S):

KISO, Keiko

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transformation in one confined tropical forest region, something that few other volumes have achieved in similar detail. The volume suffers a few shortcomings, though. The introductory chapter provides an excellent overview on the various conceptual and theoretical discussions that need to be called upon for the analysis of the book. The concluding sections of most chapters comment on these various issues, but there is no grand discussion of the implications of the Saribas case for the various theoretical debates. The Saribas case is compared to other upland Asian cases only in the last chapter, but little consolidated conclusions are drawn and the comparison appears rather an afterthought. These shortcomings are unfortunate, as their omitting would have made this volume a true great scholarly work.

(Wil de Jong • Center for Integrated Area Studies, Kyoto University)

Anders Poulsen. *Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand: Forty Years of Development and Cultural Change*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2007, xiii + 267p.

This book, written by a scholar who has long worked in the field of child psychology, describes the customs and traditions related to pregnancy and childbirth and their changes over 40 years in Northeast Thailand. The essence of this volume is the detailed and specific data deriving from the author's longitudinal research from 1961 to 2005 in a village in Udon Thani Province. Through this full description, the author presents a different perspective about classification of the rituals of pregnancy and childbirth from the one proposed by Stanley J. Tambiah, whose description of the religious practices in Northeast Thailand has had great impact on Thai studies.

This volume is organized in two main parts. The first part consists of six chapters and highlights the beliefs and practices relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Chapter one gives an outline of village life. The author was involved in a UNESCO-funded project with Tambiah, and conducted his first-time fieldwork in a "Laotian" Thai rice farming village. Through description from the earlier fieldwork, readers are informed that all treatment of the sick used to be done by ritual experts and herbal doctors—moreover, home delivery was "natural"—however, after a Health Centre was built by the government in 1987, the whole village has been gradually penetrated by modern medical care.

Chapter two explains traditional beliefs about birth in the village by reporting voices from village elders, ritual masters and midwives. In the 1960s, two kinds of rituals were directly influential upon the course of a normal childbirth. One was the ceremony for pregnant women called *suukhwan maemaan*. This ceremony is related to the belief of the fleeting soul called the *khwan*. It is believed that *khwan* remains with a person and keeps her/his body and mind comfortable. Each healthy individual without handicap has 32 *khwans*, each located in specific parts of the body. Therefore, it is essential to tie the *khwan* to the person's body on important occasions in the person's life. The other was the ceremony of protecting the fetus or the newborn baby against the evil spirit called *kae kamlerd*. When a newborn baby does not drink its mother's milk or is fretful, it is caused by the spirit called *mae kamlerd*. This spirit is understood to be the "previous mother" from the child's previous life, and she appears to take back her child. For that reason, it is said traditionally that the *kae kamlerd* ought to be performed before birth to free the baby from the threat of *mae kamlerd*. Tambiah classifies these two rituals on pregnancy and childbirth as *khwan*

rites.¹⁾ On the contrary, the author questions whether *kae kamlerd* can be included in the *khwan* rites, on the grounds that *kae kamlerd* is not based on the concept of *khwan*, but is related to the belief in *mae kamlerd* spirit.

The succeeding chapters are devoted to description of change in practices of pregnancy and birth of ordinary villagers, including the rituals. Chapter three reports how villagers practiced the *suukhwan maemaan* and *kae kamlerd*. Although it was said among those who maintain tradition-bound thinking that both rites ought to be performed prior to every birth, villagers generally have not been performing the *suukhwan maemaan* since the 1970s if the pregnant woman felt she was well. On the other hand, the *kae kamlerd* tends to be more often performed.

Chapter four discusses in full detail the changes in women's activities related to pregnancy and childbirth. Even though the local traditions relating to childbirth had been strongly maintained in the village, some customs have been vanishing. The most dramatic change has been that women no longer depend on midwives, and choose instead to deliver in hospitals.

Chapter five gives a vivid description on the custom of confinement after childbirth with herb decoctions called *yuu fai*. After the childbirth, the mother and child will lie by the fireplace for a specified period to cleanse the abdomen of "bad blood." Nowadays, in many cases, a woman who does not want any more children and is sterilized following her last birth does not perform *yuu fai*.

Chapter six discusses the ceremonies during childhood. The author asserts that there are no special customs or ceremonies throughout childhood in the village before a young man tries to be a monk, and a young woman gets pregnant.

The second part of this book constitutes the unique contribution of this book. It exhibits the original ritual text that is connected to pregnancy and childbirth with photographs, namely the rites of *suukhwan maemaan*, *taengkae mae-maan*, *taengkae mae kamlerd* and some other smaller rites. The author exhibits not only the original ritual text with translation into Thai and English, but also shows traditional recipes for herb decoctions of *yuu fai* with information gathered from elderly women and ritual experts.

The author describes the transition of pregnancy and childbirth and its related rites in great detail. Because of Tambiah's influential analysis on the rite of *khwan*, there has been no study examining the *kae kamlerd* as an independent rite distinct from the concept of *khwan*. This book is the first in describing the *kae kamlerd* based on its estrangement from the concept of *khwan*, and by doing so the author succeeds in giving a fresh insight related to newborn babies that includes the threat of *mae kamlerd*. This is the crucial contribution of the book that enhances our understanding of birth-related rites in Northeast Thailand.

Moreover, the excellent photographs which vividly describe villagers' lives for the last 40 years, are extremely valuable records for generations to come—especially the pictures of *yuu fai*, a vanishing custom in the region. The book's treatment of sources is also unique. The author uses the original recordings of the ritual text and a picture gallery accessible through the web site of Princess Maha Cakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

In spite of the valuable data it presents, the book is not quite clear on how women in Northeast Thailand have experienced and faced up to each of these crucial events in their life-course. Take the case of childbirth, which is a significant event for a woman, but which is described only as one of the customs related to women in the

1) Tambiah, S. J. 1970. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

region. The vivid descriptions provided by this volume stimulate simple questions such as: How the custom of childbirth has been changed by the intention of specific actors; Can a mother manage her pregnancy by herself; Does a woman have a voice in the decision to perform the rites by herself regarding her own pregnancy and childbirth?

The problem of reproduction is not an issue confined only to women. We know that childbirth can also become an occasion where forms of power such as state or government, community elders, and also importantly, the husband and relatives, may intrude upon her life. This

being so, a description of childbirth must necessarily explain how such actors relate to each other in a particular cultural setting. Now that we know factors such as family planning, other development programs and increase in women's migration have caused the changes of the customs and traditions related to pregnancy and childbirth in Northeast Thailand by the vivid description of this book, we are led to some further questions towards understanding the region.

(Kiso Keiko 〈木曾恵子〉・Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University)